Towards an Alan Paton Literary Tour

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Towards an Alan Paton Literary Tour

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No study of ‘Place, Text, Tourism’ - the theme of our colloquium - in the context of KwaZulu Natal would be complete without reference to Alan Paton. The degree of sustained interest by tourists in Paton and his writing is evident in the fact that, as Graham Stewart illustrated in his paper earlier today, the KwaZulu Natal tourism website has recorded more Alan Paton ‘hits’ than any other author on the KwaZulu Natal Literary Map, from its inception in 2002 to the present.

Much of the interest of tourists in Alan Paton as a prominent literary figure can be attributed to the fact that his successful first novel Cry, the Beloved Country (1948), which won immediate international acclaim, is still probably the most widely read single work of any South African author. Although it has been condemned by some as a sentimental portrayal of social injustice, the novel reveals a profound awareness of the social and political problems of South African life which continued to inform Paton’s subsequent writing, both factual and imaginative, and which continue to interest literary tourists in South Africa today.

For these reasons, any South African literary tourism project would be incomplete without the inclusion of Alan Paton, who was born in Pietermaritzburg and lived and wrote for all but thirteen years of his life, in KwaZulu Natal.

This research into the development of an Alan Paton Literary Tour is intended to form part of the wider NRF research initiative which has given rise to this colloquium today: the KwaZulu Natal literary tourism project led by, amongst others, Lindy Skeieb and Graham Stewart.

A central objective of the study is to locate the literary work of Alan Paton in the context of literary tourism by re-examining the social and political nature of Paton’s writing with particular reference to place. The notion of place or ‘literary space’ in this context includes the fictional localities of Paton’s novels, short stories and journalism; significant places identified with his biographical and autobiographical accounts; and places singled out by historians and archivists as being especially important features in the design of literary tours. The study intends to contribute to the debate on the relationship between tourism and literature by developing an Alan Paton tour setting up an associated web site providing ancillary tourist information:

- researching existing Paton tours and tourist literature;
- designing additional materials, ranging from the purely informational to serious scholarly reflections and reviews.

The Alan Paton Centre, located on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of KwaZulu Natal, would be central to any Alan Paton literary tour. The Centre was established as a permanent memorial to Paton soon after his death in 1988. Here Paton’s study has been recreated using the original layout, actual furniture and colour scheme of his study in Lintrose, his Bothea’s Hill home. There is much to interest both literary tourists and scholars in the Centre, including Paton’s books, journals, notes and memorabilia. It was here in 2003 that Hermann Wittenberg discovered the handwritten manuscript of the very recently published Lost City of the Kalahari (2005), which tells the fascinating story of the expedition of Paton and six fellow adventurers who set out on 26 June 1956 in the “Kalahari Polka”, an elderly five-ton Austin truck, to find the ruins of a mythical Lost City deep in the Kalahari Desert. Wittenberg describes his discovery of Paton’s narrative which was a complete surprise because Paton never referred to it subsequently in any way, in his Introduction to the text as follows:

While looking at Paton’s pre-1948 unpublished work, I came across an enigmatically titled folder named “Natal Kalahari Expedition”. Among the collection of equipment lists, maps, mileage tallies and other travel-related miscellanea, was a sheaf of pages torn out of a school exercise book that contained Paton’s Lost City narrative. I am very grateful for the kind hospitality and assistance of Jewel Koopman and Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen of the Allan Paton Centre, who shared my excitement at the discovery of this remarkable text, and also arranged for the transcript of the original longhand manuscript.

(Lost City of the Kalahari p.ix)

The centre provides an excellent starting point for an exploration of how the constructed places of Paton’s fictional writing interface with ‘real’ places for readers of Alan Paton. At the opening of the Alan Paton Centre on 25 April 1989, Professor Colin Webb of the University of Natal stressed the living nature of the Centre:

This memorial is not a graven monument; still less is it a shrine. It is not a place for hero worship or for the veneration of someone who is dead. Its purpose is quite different. It is a facility for the living, an instrument for carrying forward the struggle for improved human relations that filled so much of Alan Paton’s essentially human life.

(The Alan Paton Centre UKZN pamphlet)

The tour will be based at the Alan Paton Centre and will incorporate visits to locations outside Pietermaritzburg, particularly in the Ixopo - Weenen area with a trip on the Alan Paton Express, and Diepkloof on the outskirts of Johannesburg in Gauteng province where Paton spent thirteen years as Warden, then Principal of Diepkloof Reformatory for black boys in pre-apartheid South Pietermaritzburg, particularly in the Ixopo - Weenen area with a trip on the Alan Paton Express, and Diepkloof on the outskirts of Johannesburg in Gauteng province where Paton spent thirteen years as Warden, then Principal of Diepkloof Reformatory for black boys in pre-apartheid South
years as Warden, then Principal of Diepkloof Reformatory for black boys in pre-apartheid South Africa - years described by Paton in Towards the Mountain (1980) as "...not necessarily the happiest, but certainly the fullest years of our lives".

The concept of a literary 'place' informs the development of any literary tour or tourist package. The socio-historical narratives inherent in Paton's writings will be linked to Eisenbergs concept of the place as text (1985). The project seeks to enhance and deepen the experience of tourists, ranging from day trippers to serious literary scholars, by exploring the physical, emotional and intellectual components in a Paton tourist package. These components have been identified by spatial discourse literary theorist Karjalainen (1999) as defining a literary 'place'. Karjalainen's taxonomy proposes the interpretation of place in three ways: mimetic, hermeneutic and textual. The mimetic aspect of place in Paton's work will be established by recording the physical realities of these locations (for example, by photographing them and using longitude and latitude co-ordinates to chart these locations on a map). The hermeneutic analyses of place in Paton's work will explore the subjective meaning which the viewer in Paton's text brings to the locations in his writing. This will result in the evoking of imaginary literary landscapes (social, cultural and historical) in places associated with Paton in the minds of literary tourists. Karjalainen's third level of definition, the textual, points to an exploration of the 'dance of meaning' or shifting interplay between tourists and their constantly changing interpretations of the Paton texts with which specific locations are associated. This notion is similar to Jameson's concept of a 'cognitive map' that reflects the full social, political and historical context of the literary place.

This transition from physical reality and subjective meaning to a far more profound level of awareness is experienced, for example, by readers of Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country who view the novel's physical locale in the Valley of a Thousand Hills, perhaps from the Alan Paton Express train which takes visitors through this famous rural landscape. Travellers experience immersion in an imaginative world as described by Squire (1993) and are enthralled as the location evokes the lyrical opening passage of the novel:

> There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke; and from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys of Africa. About you there is grass and bracken and you may hear the forlorn crying of the tithoya, one of the birds of the veld. Below you is the valley of the Umzimkulu, on its journey from the Drakensberg to the sea; and beyond and behind the river, great hill after great hill; and beyond and behind them, the mountains of Ingeli and East Griqualand. The grass is rich and matted, you cannot see the soil. It holds the rain and mist, and they seep into the ground, feeding the streams in every kloof. It is well-tended, and not too many cattle feed upon it; not too many fires burn it, laying bare the soil. Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator. Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed.

(Wayne, p.7)

For the literary tourist, themes, characters and socio-political events drawn from Paton's writing serve both to illuminate the text of the literary attraction (the Paton literary tour) and provide a new narrative and new insights into the history, culture and society of South Africa. In this sense, Paton's work becomes the 'cultural capital' that may be 'mined' (Robinson, 2001), while simultaneously contributing to the scholarly enterprise of subjecting his work to critical study and research resulting in the creation of a literary tourism 'text' such as a KwaZulu Natal Literary Map entry, a Paton web site or content for the training of tour guides.

In 'The South African Novel in English' (1956), Paton defines the task of the 'literary worker' in South Africa as he saw it:

> ...this is the job that has to be done, this painful laying bare of the truth, in the form of storytelling whose rules must be faithfully obeyed.

(Knocking on the Door p.147)

As these words suggest, Paton's commitment to tell the 'truth' (as he perceives it) about his society, and his desire for the counseling resolution of form, make him, in the words of Jean Manquard (1980), 'a fictional historian'. His acute and sustained observation of his society provides valuable insight into the conflicts and concerns of his particular socio-cultural milieu. But, as Michael Green has observed in Novel Histories (1997), such discussions regarding the essentially narrative nature of history writing were soon overtaken by a full-scale assault upon the seductive closures of narratives in general, with history represented as perhaps the most insidious of the master narratives needing to be interrogated.

(P.2)

Paton himself described his purpose as a writer as follows in an interview with Harvey Breit in New York in 1949:

> I should like to write books about South Africa which would really stab people in the conscience... But I haven't purely a moral purpose... I also believe in the task of trying to interpret South Africa to the South Africans so they can see themselves without illusions. It is a very fascinating task.

Paton's generosity of spirit, his belief in the integrity and worth of every individual, and his respect for those who struggle to transcend racial and ideological barriers to initiate a sense of common humanity, establish his commitment to an egalitarian society. Yet recent trends in critical thinking have tended to disparage Paton's liberal humanism, based as it is on Christian examples of truth, justice and respect for individual life, which some regard as old fashioned and of little practical use in the tough environment of present-day South Africa. Ezekiel Mphahlele, writing in 1982, had accused Paton of falsifying human reality by creating cardboard characters which sentimentalise blacks as helpless victims. Lewis Nikosi (1985), while accepting the integrity of Paton's courageous plea for racial justice, accuses Paton of a portrayal of South Africa that professes to be a faithful depiction of social reality, but is really an example of the 'seductive closure' referred to by Green. Nikosi also questions Paton's ficticious control of black characters, and describes Stephen Khumalo of Cry, the Beloved Country as a:'...cunning expression of white liberal sentiment' who represents the subconscious desire of whites to survive the 'blind tragedy' which Nikosi foresaw in South Africa.

This study will respond by arguing that criticism which views Paton's writings as naive, sentimentally optimistic 'period documents' that have been overtaken by events, fails to take sufficiently into account the socially responsive aspect of his work in relation to story-telling conventions. In Paton's fictional writings, individual action takes on real significance only within the restraining contexts of social and political conflicts, while Paton the artist seeks to tie his moral purpose to illustrative episodes of experience. His continuing popularity attests to his success.
This study will contextualise and interrogate Paton’s fictional and biographical responses in the landscape of South Africa prior to and during the apartheid era, from 1948 when his first novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, was published until his death in 1988, which coincided with the publication of the second part of his autobiography, *Journey Continued*. The way in which Paton’s optimism and pride in his country, evident in his earlier writing, were replaced by the darker mood of his later works will be explored in relation to Lukacs’ major defining characteristics of the historical novel. Historically interesting examples of the testing of Paton’s Christian liberal philosophy by the ‘realpolitik’ of the increasingly intractable South African landscape will be analysed in relation to literary theorist and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘dialogical interplay of voices’ and an analysis of absent ‘voices’. Using Bakhtin’s principle that genuine dialogue presupposes that something, but not everything, can be known, Paton’s acute and sustained observation of South African society will be scrutinized in an exploration of the representative ‘voices’ which are, or are not, present in his literary text. It will argue that in Paton’s writing, as with the Lukacian historical ‘type’ individual action takes on real significance, only within the constraining contexts of social and political conflicts.

In addition, as referred to earlier, the discussion of Paton’s work in relation to literary tourism will draw on literature in which the relationship between literature, physical space and ideological framing are considered including the writings of Urry (1990), Squire (1993), Karjalainen (1999) and Robinson and Andersen (2001). In particular, the post-modern view of place as a literary text (Eisenberg, 1985) will inform an exploration of the ways in which Paton’s constructed places interface with ‘real’ places.

In these ways, the development of an Alan Paton tour will provide a coherent and practical framework for an authentic, sustainable literary tourist attraction. The Alan Paton literary tour, web site and related printed tourist material which emerge from this study will enable South African literary researchers, general readers and cultural tourists to explore and make more meaningful connections between place, writer and identity in the work of Alan Paton.